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Bridgewater and the Influenza Epidemic of 1918

William F. Hanna

Friday, October 4, 1918 was a beautiful autumn day, but signs of the distress that gripped the region were everywhere to be seen. As J.H. Dickinson, editor and publisher of the *Bridgewater Independent*, surveyed the town from his office in Central Square, he gave expression to the worry and sorrow felt by many of his neighbors: “It almost seems like a continuous funeral procession on the street,” he wrote. “Next to the doctors the undertakers are the busiest people in town.”

Although the newspaperman’s grief was localized, he penned those words in the midst of an influenza pandemic that became one of the most devastating natural disasters in human history. In his *America’s Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918* (1989), Alfred W. Crosby approximates American deaths at 675,000. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that Massachusetts was “ground zero” of the outbreak in the U.S. with a death toll of more than 45,000 between September 1918 and February 1919. John M. Barry, in *The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History* (2005), notes that the death toll from influenza during that period may have reached as high as 100 million worldwide. Bridgewater’s portion of that cataclysm came quietly but it rapidly overwhelmed both local officials and the town’s 8,000 residents. Many had spent the summer of 1918 fully involved in supporting the American war effort in Europe, then in its second year. Fundraising to sustain a host of patriotic causes was underway, and planning for the fourth Liberty Loan drive was in its final stages. Area newspapers published frequent updates on

Bridgewater boys who were serving in the military, and local people followed the news from overseas closely.

Many townspeople had read the newspaper accounts in early September reporting on a mounting crisis among sailors at Boston’s Commonwealth Pier, as well as in army camps where



Scene from Camp Devens, 1918. In the second week of September 1918, influenza spread to Camp Devens outside of Boston, killing hundreds of men (Photo credit: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, http://www.flu.gov/pandemic/history/1918/your_state/northeast/massachusetts).

medical officers were trying to curb an outbreak of influenza. On September 8, the disease had made its appearance at Fort Devens, in Ayer, Massachusetts, and just three weeks later that facility was inundated with sick men. The base hospital, built to accommodate 2,000 patients, held 8,000 by month’s end. Barry writes that Dr. Roy Grist, a medical officer at Devens, told a colleague that the scene presented at the hospital “beats any sight they ever had in France after a battle.” There were also reports that state health officials were preparing to confront the inevitable appearance of the disease among the general public.

Since editor Dickinson’s newspaper was published only on Fridays, it is impossible to know when the first case of influenza appeared in Bridgewater, and this situation is complicated by the fact that doctors were not legally required by the state to report cases of the disease until October 4. Nevertheless, by September 19, the *Brockton Times* reported that influenza had made great headway in Bridgewater, and a day later the *Independent* stated that, due to illness among students and teachers, the town’s public schools would be closed during the upcoming week. Furthermore, Sunday schools would be closed for two weeks as would the local theater. During the following week all public gatherings were cancelled until further notice.

The campus of the Bridgewater State Normal School was also feeling effects of the disease. Fall classes had begun just a week earlier, but already several of the approximately 200 students had gone home suffering from influenza. Within a week, the situation had worsened to the point that on Friday, September 27, the *Independent* reported that although there had been no serious outbreaks among the students, the maintenance and administrative staff had been “riddled to pieces in all departments.” “Thanks to the help of



P7420 Square, Bridgewater, Mass.

Photo Underwood & Underwood, N. Y.

Postcard. Bridgewater Central Square, early 1920s (Private Collection of David Moore, Bridgewater, Mass.).

volunteers from among the students,” said the newspaper, “work has been kept along but it has been and still is a trying time for those in authority.”

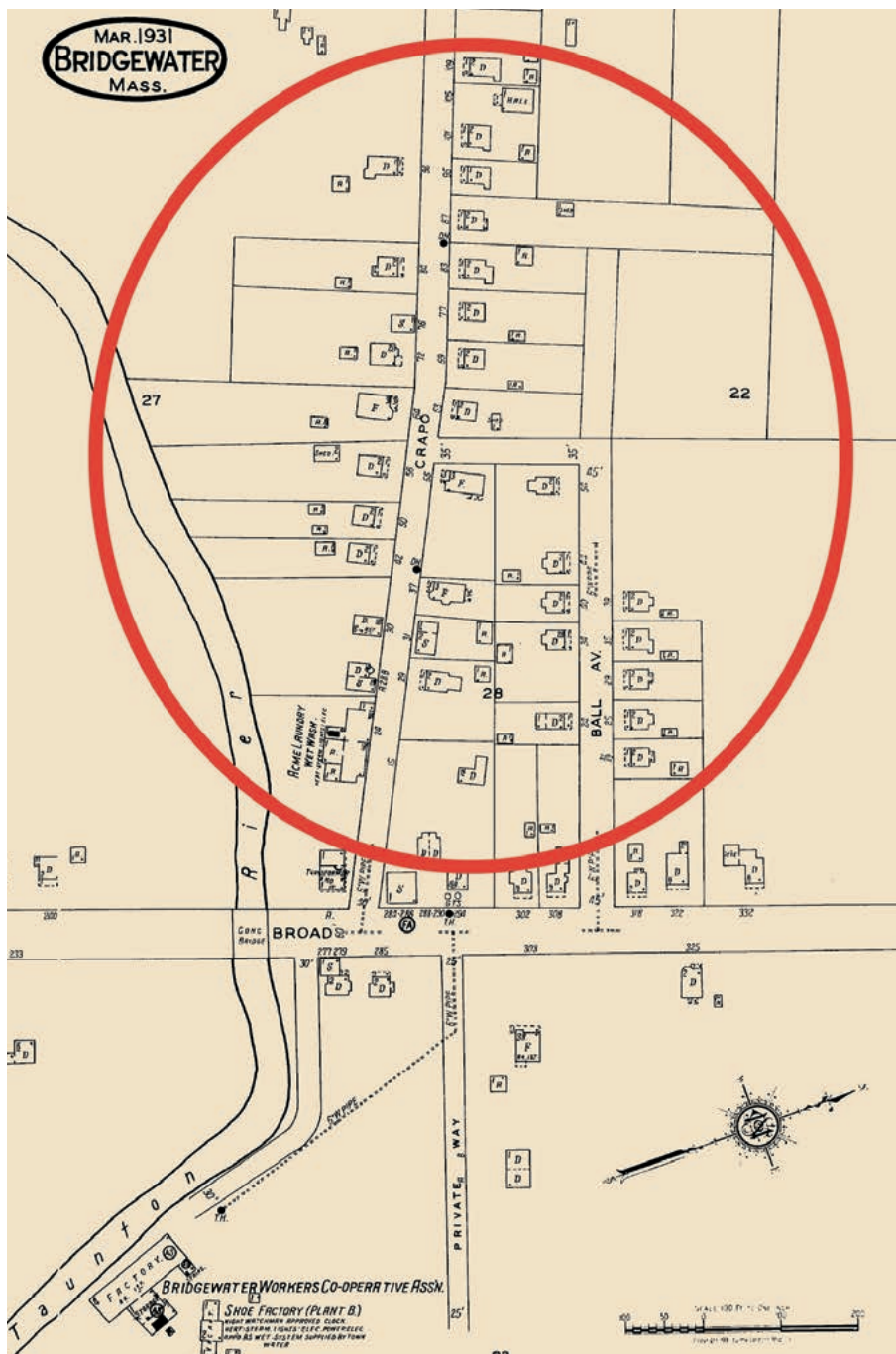
As the number of cases increased in Bridgewater, attention turned to Dr. Albert F. Hunt (1875–1963), chairman of the town’s Board of Health (and the man after whom the university’s Hunt Hall is named). A graduate of Brown University (1899) and the Harvard Medical School (1907), Hunt was also a member of the town’s school committee and the Chief Medical Officer at the Normal School. On September 25, Hunt presided over a meeting of the Board at which an Emergency Citizens’ Committee was appointed to help manage the town’s response to the worsening crisis. Reporting on September 27, the *Independent* noted that Hunt had said that during the previous two weeks influenza had “scoured the town.” Doctors worked

day and night but were so busy that they were unable to answer their calls. Also among the most immediate problems was a critical shortage of nurses.

Although the disease affected all parts of Bridgewater, neighborhoods with the largest numbers of foreign-born residents were hit hardest. This was especially true of the area surrounding the Stanley Ironworks complex, located on High Street, along the banks of the Town River. Immigrants from Italy and Portugal accounted for a large number of the company’s labor force in that era, and on Thursday, September 26, the *Brockton Enterprise* reported that 200 workers were absent due to sickness. The paper noted that because of high absenteeism, the company was unable to get a full day’s labor from the day shift, and had suspended work entirely on the night shift. The *Enterprise* also reported that the Perkins iron foundry and the L.Q. White shoe

factory, both of which relied heavily on immigrant labor, had been forced by high absenteeism to reduce output.

One of the first measures undertaken by the crisis committee was to establish an emergency hospital in the midst of the hardest-hit area. The Stanley Company offered the use of the bottom tenement at the Riverside House, located on Wall Street, near its intersection with High Street. With incidental expenses paid by the company, the hospital held 11 beds and when it opened on Friday, September 27, it was immediately filled to capacity with men, women and children, including some who were critically ill with influenza or the resulting pneumonia. A nurse sent by the state had arrived from Brighton on the previous evening, and two others, including one who had been secured by the Stanley ironworks, soon followed. These nurses, along with several local volunteers, staffed the hospital. In its



Map of Crapo Street and Ball Avenue Neighborhood, Bridgewater, Mass., 1931 (Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970, Sheet #13. Accessed in Special Collections, Maxwell Library, Bridgewater State University). By 1931, the neighborhood had changed very little from the days when it was wracked by influenza.

report, the Bridgewater Emergency Committee stated that despite their best efforts some of the patients at Riverside were beyond help, and five died within a few days of their admissions. The report also noted that it was often necessary for the nurses to work from 24 to 72 hours without the benefit of sustained rest. On Friday, September

27, one of the nurses along with a member of the Emergency Committee visited houses on Crapo Street and Ball Avenue where, officials later reported, “epidemic conditions were probably worse than in any other part of Bridgewater.” Only the nursing shortage prevented the opening of another hospital in that vicinity.

Stunned by the magnitude of the epidemic, Americans searched for plausible explanations as to how such a calamity could happen. A *Boston Globe* headline on September 19 speculated that “Men from U-Boats May Have Scattered Germs.” The accompanying story quoted a federal health official, who warned: “The Germans have started epidemics in Europe, and there is no reason why they should be particularly gentle with America.” Gina Kolata, in her 1995 book *Flu: The Story of the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1919 and the Search for the Virus that Caused It*, mentions the submarine rumors as well as the suspicion that Germans had smuggled Bayer aspirin tainted with influenza germs into the United States. Reality, however, was much less dramatic. In fact, this was the second and much deadlier outbreak of influenza in 1918. After first appearing in a milder form during the spring, a second and much more virulent strain of the disease emerged in late summer. It would have brought little comfort to Americans in that anxious autumn of 1918 to know that the disease would be gone by the spring of 1919 and reappear only briefly in 1920.

As Bridgewater tried to bring the outbreak under control, a beleaguered Dr. Hunt found himself the target of critics who thought that more should be done to end the emergency. On September 26, the *Enterprise* claimed that Dr. Hunt “cannot find time to properly handle his work,” and a few days later the newspaper continued that theme when it said: “There is a feeling among well informed people that the board of health should take more active steps toward fighting the disease.”

While the same edition of the *Enterprise* noted that in Bridgewater the “flu continues to reap its quota of victims, especially among the foreign born,” it was to those immigrant communities that town officials devoted most of their available resources. It was also in those neighborhoods that the urgency of the situation frequently came into conflict



A late-life picture of Dr. Albert F. Hunt and Mrs. Hunt, Bridgewater, Mass. (Courtesy of Bridgewater magazine, Marketing and Communications Department, Bridgewater State University).

with longstanding cultural traditions of the residents. On October 4, even as the *Bridgewater Independent* reported that the situation seemed somewhat improved, Dr. Hunt voiced a frustration widely felt among his colleagues in the medical profession. Badly overworked and under a great deal of stress, he charged that within the immigrant neighborhoods, “The ignorance manifested of even ordinary health precautions is unbelievable . . . to those who have had it to deal with. Many totally disregard the instructions of the physicians and nurses.” When a member of the family shows signs of illness, he said, “the house is shut up tight and the neighbors, men, women and children, flock in and sit around, sometimes remaining for hours.” When a flu victim died, said Hunt, the situation became even more dangerous because the family would often wait several hours before calling the undertaker.

On Friday, October 4, when the Government of Massachusetts required that physicians report all new cases of the disease, placards were placed on houses of the sick in the more congested areas of Bridgewater where infection was most prevalent. This served as notice of quarantine, and to enforce it the State Guard—a volunteer force that replaced the National Guard after it was federalized for wartime duty—was called out to patrol those

neighborhoods in order to prevent anyone from visiting the placarded houses. The *Enterprise* reported that this caused hardship among some immigrants because there were often cases where several roomed together, and those who were not sick were denied entrance if one of their housemates displayed symptoms of the disease. Nevertheless, shortly thereafter, an unidentified doctor who had been sent from Washington, D.C. inspected quarantined houses on Crapo Street and also visited workers at the L.Q. White shoe factory. He reported to the Emergency Committee that thanks to the measures that had been undertaken, the situation was improving.

The tide turned quickly. In the last days of September 1918, even as the death toll continued to rise among those who had earlier contracted the disease, fewer and fewer new cases of influenza were reported, and by the end of the first week in October the worst of the crisis had passed. On October 4, a second hospital had opened at the Hudnut house, located at the corner of Grove and Bedford streets. Holding 20 beds, it was used primarily as a convalescent home and a nursery for children who were either waiting for their mothers to recover or for placement in foster homes. By the time it closed on October 12, the *Independent* reported that the Riverside hospital had already been shut down and that the doctors and nurses from out of town had departed.

Historians who attempt to calculate Bridgewater’s losses in the epidemic face the same difficulty as those who try to estimate worldwide damage. Thanks to the untold thousands of unreported cases, as well as to the urgency and magnitude of the crisis, we are left with approximations. But by any reckoning, the results were devastating. For example, the handwritten ledger book kept by the Bridgewater Board of Health during the crisis lists only 290 reported cases of influenza.

Yet the official report issued by the Emergency Citizens’ Committee—a much more reliable source—states that its conservative estimate was 2,000 cases. Similarly, town records show that 45 local people succumbed to influenza in the ten weeks between September 13 and November 23, 1918. However, since many flu victims died of pneumonia, and since doctors were not required to report cases of influenza separately until October 4, it is reasonable to speculate that at least some of the deaths attributed to pneumonia were part of the influenza epidemic. This is very likely to have been true, because from September 18 until October 2, 1918, another 13 townspeople died of pneumonia, a much higher number than in other years. Like their fellow victims worldwide, most of the Bridgewater dead were in the prime of their lives when death called. The Citizens’ Committee Report states their average age as just 27 years.

Within weeks of the end of the crisis, an armistice was signed concluding World War I. Schools reopened, religious communities gathered again, the Normal School students were back at their desks, and factories returned to full production. Local boys came home from the military and life again resumed the quiet pace familiar to many small towns. Even so, no one who lived through the influenza pandemic of 1918 ever forgot it. They carried the fearful memories, the uncertainty, and the ineffable sadness with them always, even as the disaster itself passed into history.



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